



Feminist Narratology in Elizabeth Strout's *Tell Me Everything*¹

Wang Wei, Ma Chaofan

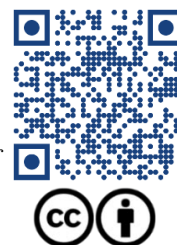
School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, People's Republic of China
Email : 1845076930@qq.com

Received: 10 Mar 2026; Received in revised form: 11 Apr 2026; Accepted: 13 Apr 2026; Available online: 17 Apr 2026

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Abstract—In traditional literary texts, female characters are often constructed as emotional objects, long relegated to the margins of discursive power and even deprived of the possibility of self-expression. However, Elizabeth Strout, the 2009 Pulitzer Prize winner, in her novel *Tell Me Everything*, employs a series of intricate narrative strategies that not only break with this deeply ingrained literary convention but also endow women with the right to speak and discursive subjectivity. Through the orchestration of authorial narrative voice, the use of narrative gaps created by un-narrated events, and unconventional character portrayals, Strout constructs a narrative space where men and women engage in equal dialogue and coexist harmoniously. This paper attempts to analyze Strout's narrative techniques in this work from the theoretical perspective of feminist narratology, exploring how she conveys a profound feminine consciousness through formal innovation, and thereby revealing the reconstruction and reflection on gender order embedded within the text.



Keywords—feminist narratology, narrative techniques, authorial narrative voice, un-narrated events, Elizabeth Strout

¹ 本论文为北京第二外国语学院 2025 年度研究生科学研究一般项目“似水年华：《奥利弗·基特里奇》中的”阶段性成果。

I. INTRODUCTION

Tell Me Everything is written by Elizabeth Strout who won Pulitzer Prize in 2009. The main story she presents to us revolves around a murder case, with Bob Burgess, a lawyer, defending Matthew. Together with the main story, other stories are scattered in the novel. In this novel, Strout demonstrates unique feminine narrative techniques. Strout changes perspectives from different people freely which helps her to form the whole novel through eyes of different women which gives women authority to narrate. Except constant change perspectives she also employs other narrative technique like un-narrated events and unconventional characterization to reveal female

survival dilemma and convey her female consciousness.

This paper tries to analysis this novel from the perspective of feminist narratology. Traditionally, narrative patterns structuralist narratologists' conclusions are based on their intense study of traditional works created by male authors which are different from female authors in various ways and are not general. Narratological studies are absent from nearly all of the otherwise eclectic and wide-ranging collections of feminist approaches to literature.(Lanser,1986) Thus, Susan Sniader Lanser proposed feminist narratology. Due to different social background and living condition, female writers may present distinct writing patterns and writing skills from man to show their concern toward female problems.

Starting from Strout's unique narrative strategies, we can glimpse, through the subtle details of the text, characteristics that distinguish her from traditional male writing, as well as her distinctive feminine consciousness and reflections.

II. AUTHORIAL NARRATIVE VOICE

Feminist narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues that voice "has become a term for identity and power for those groups and individuals who have been silenced." Therefore, "female voice is actually a site of ideological struggle, and this ideological tension is manifested in the actual practice of the text." (Lanser 1992) Lanser divides narrative voice into three categories: personal voice, authorial voice, and communal voice. The authorial narrative voice also referred to as third-person narration, denotes "a narrative state that is heterodiegetic, collective, and potentially self-referential" (Lanser 1992), which grants the narrator an omniscient perspective, allowing for seamless transitions between different narrative levels and significantly enhancing the authority and depth of the storytelling (Mao 2022). This third-person narrative provides Strout with expansive narrative freedom. The constant shifts in narrative perspective enrich the novel's layers and support the creation of complex female figures and the struggle for female discourse rights.

In the opening section of the novel, the narrative focuses on the protagonist Bob, detailing his experience of being denied a visit with his brother in New York. Just as readers begin to delve into Bob's inner world, the narrative is abruptly interrupted by a phone call from his ex-wife, Pam. From this point, Bob's story is temporarily set aside, and the author shifts focus to an in-depth exploration of Pam's emotional journey. Because authorial narrators exist outside the narrative time (indeed, one might say they exist outside the fiction itself) and are not "personalized" by events, they thus possess a certain kind of conventional authority (Lanser 1992). At this point, Strout breaks away from conventional linear narrative and shifts the narrative perspective to Pam. Strout meticulously depicts the multifaceted complexities of Pam's life, revealing the roots of her psychological trauma. Pam's anxiety stems from her concerns for her children and the pain of betrayal caused by her husband's infidelity. Strout not only presents these external triggers but also delves into how they become internalized as Pam's emotional wounds. By introducing her struggle with alcohol addiction—a coping mechanism that simultaneously exacerbates her anxiety—the narrative further complicates Pam's predicament. The author carefully portrays how Pam conceals her addiction, adding another layer of tension to her character. In this

section, Strout does not stop at recounting Pam's story; she immerses readers in the nuances of Pam's emotional fluctuations and moments of hysteria, ensuring a profound understanding of the depth of her experiences. Without such detailed depiction, Pam's emotional outbursts might be superficially dismissed as mere "female hysteria"—a reductive and essentialist interpretation. Instead, Strout constructed the discourse authority of the silent and unvoiced women by the authorial voice. Building on this, Strout creates a three-dimensional female figure struggling within marriage, which has resonated with a wide audience of women, besides, she grants women an equal voice with men.

III. NON-NARRATED EVENTS

In 1988, Jellard Prince published a paper titled "The Disnarrated" in the journal *Style*, where he first introduced the research term un-narrated events. At the same time, Prince summarized the reasons for the unnarrated events as things that cannot be narrated or are not worth narrating according to a particular narrative, possibly because it violates laws (social, authorial, generic, formal, etc). In other words, Prince believed that there are two types of narrative discourse in narrative texts: one is the narration of non-occurring events, and the other is the ellipsis of events that have occurred. Although Prince pointed out that the reasons for the un-narrated are social and cultural constraints, he focused on the narration of non-occurring events and was primarily concerned with the narrative function of discourse, without expanding on narrative actions, intentions, and so on (Sun 2014). In *Fictions of Authority*, Susan Lanser picks up a mutual term "voice" to join feminist criticism and classical narratology together, then focuses on the three kinds of narrative voice, namely authorial voice, personal voice and communal voice, and associates technical exploration of narrative voice with gender politics in feminism to achieve a certain kind of narrative authority (Yuan 2018). By comparing the narrative texts of male and female authors, researchers will be able to identify the constraints of various cultural conventions on narrative behavior and explore the authors' deep narrative intentions and gender consciousness (Sun 2014).

There is always a gap between abstract symbols and the images they represent, and there are always possible misunderstandings in communication between people from different backgrounds. Sometimes, subtle experiences or feelings are difficult to convey through symbols, and it is at this point that the unnarratable or the unsaid emerges (Sun 2014).

The novel is woven from a tapestry of stories set in a small town, each one a thread in the larger narrative fabric. One particular story stands out for its complexity and emotional weight: the mysterious death of Mrs. Beach. Despite its significance in the plot's development, Strout chooses to present only a brief and fragmented account of this case. When the truth is finally revealed through the character of Matthew, it is delivered in just a few lines, yet it lays bare a heart-wrenching tragedy that had befallen the Beach family. The harrowing truth unfolds: Diana, Mrs. Beach's daughter, had been raped by her own father and one of his friends. In the aftermath, Mrs. Beach's reaction was not one of sympathy or support, but of growing resentment. As time went on, she berated Diana, heaping further emotional abuse upon her. This secondary injury ultimately drove Diana to seek revenge by killing her mother. This tragedy is not narrated completely by any single character; instead, it is pieced together by the reader from fragments scattered throughout the novel. Beneath this tragedy, the trauma Diana endured is something she is unwilling to speak of, to the point where it cannot be articulated directly. From her childhood into middle age, the pain she experienced exceeded the capacity of linguistic symbols to express, rendering it unnarratable. Due to Diana's suicide after killing her mother, the pain that circulated between them remains inaccessible to outsiders. Thus, the author creates a narrative gap, opening a channel for dialogue and inviting the reader into the world of the text. This narrative choice fully demonstrates the female author's humanistic concern and profound narrative ethics. Strout does not turn Diana's trauma into a tragic spectacle for consumption; instead, through narrative gaps, she respects the female experiences that are often silenced and simplified in real life. Through her restraint, she refuses to further violate the victim's dignity—she does not speak the unspeakable pain on her behalf, nor does she present the unrepresentable wounds in her place. This restraint is precisely the ultimate respect for female subjectivity.

This narrative gap implicitly contains a profound critique of the patriarchal discourse system. In the eyes of male characters like Matthew, this is merely a simple case of revenge, the conclusion of a personal vendetta. However, through what is left unsaid, Strout hints at the complex truths that cannot be contained within linear logic: the cycle of intergenerational trauma, society's discipline of the female body, and the distorted emotions shaped by the expectations of motherhood. These issues are often simplified or obscured in male-dominated narrative traditions. Through silence itself, Strout punctures that self-proclaimed "omniscient narration"—she tells readers that some truths are not impossible to

speak, but have long been selectively ignored. By inviting readers into the gaps, she allows those female experiences excluded from mainstream discourse to finally find a place to dwell within the fissures of the text.

Cultural values of gender have some relationship with patterns of organization used in telling stories (Ahmadzadeh 2014). Strout creates narrative gaps with her unique feminine tenderness. In her writing, what remains unsaid often speaks louder than what is explicitly stated, and within the spaces left blank, there echo the voices of those who have long yearned to be heard but have never been able to speak.

IV. UNCONVENTIONAL CHARACTERIZATION

The binary gender opposition that has long existed in the literary world is, in many ways, a reflection of the real-world power dynamics between men and women. This opposition has historically reinforced traditional gender roles, limiting the scope of both male and female characters and perpetuating stereotypes that stifle individuality and authenticity. In her novel, Strout challenges this long-standing binary opposition and strives to construct a more inclusive and peaceful world for both sexes. By breaking down traditional gender stereotypes, she aligns herself with the shared goals of feminists who seek to dismantle the rigid structures that have long defined gender roles. This effort is evident in the portrayal of both male and female characters, who defy conventional expectations.

Traditional gender roles cast the masculine as rational, strong, active, decisive, adventurous, protective, creative and dominating (Chatraporn 2006), while male characters in *Tell Me Everything* deviate from the traditional archetype men. They are depicted as nurturing and emotionally expressive, taking on roles that involve caring for the family and openly displaying their feelings. Bob, one of the main characters, whose image is quite different from the male image written by previous male writers is an emotional person with a delicate mind. When he discovers that he falls in love with Lucy, he becomes sentimental. Simultaneously, his behavior doesn't match social expectations. He is no longer in the shadow of the traditional male image, but he embodies traits that society typically defines as feminine. In most part of the novel, he is presented as a man who could provide emotional value. When Pam encounters intractable problems with her family, she has no hesitation to meet Bob who can listen to her pain in so as to release her suppressed emotion in Crosby. After Pam finishes her story, Strout presents readers a delicate description of Bob's mental activity. "He understood the

situation this woman was in. He felt the sadness of it as though an outgoing tide moved slowly through him ” (Strout 2024). Through the meticulous depiction of Bob's inner world, Strout highlights the character's exceptional emotional perceptiveness, thereby constructing a male subject who is emotionally rich, highly susceptible to affect, and at odds with traditional masculinity.

The portrayal of female characters in the novel similarly embodies a series of unique qualities that break free from traditional conventions, thereby collectively fostering, alongside the non-stereotypical male figures, a reflection on the established gender order. In the novel, main female characters, such as Lucy, Olive, and Margaret, refuse to be confined to the trivial routines **imposed by traditional domestic roles, instead, by** establishing their individual spiritual aspirations and value pursuits, they participate in the construction of a broader historical narrative and the public sphere. Margaret is a notably significant and remarkable character. As a female pastor, she operates within a professional sphere traditionally dominated by men. Within the long-established domain of religious leadership, women have historically been marginalized or excluded. Despite this, Margaret not only secures her place within the ecclesiastical structure but also earns the genuine respect and trust of her congregation. Her sermons are both logically rigorous and emotionally resonant—they are not only theologically precise discourses but also heartfelt expressions rooted in personal experience, thereby evoking profound emotional resonance among her listeners. When faced with a crisis in her career, Margaret does not conceal her vulnerability. Such emotional openness is not a sign of weakness, but rather a natural human response to adversity, underscoring the authenticity and complexity of her character. More importantly, she neither succumbs to despair nor shirks her responsibilities; instead, she demonstrates psychological resilience and moral steadfastness in the face of difficulty. By portraying Margaret as a figure who moves fluidly between reason and emotion, Strout deconstructs the traditional gender stereotype that associates women with irrational emotionality, while simultaneously challenging the rationalist bias that excludes emotion from the public sphere. Margaret's character illustrates that emotional intelligence is not antithetical to leadership, but rather an essential component of it. Empathy, compassion, and emotional awareness are not liabilities, instead, they deepen interpersonal connections and enhance moral authority.

In her novel, Strout masterfully deconstructs traditional gender roles and challenges the patriarchal norms that have long defined literature and society. By

portraying male characters like Bob as nurturing and emotionally expressive, and female characters like Lucy, Olive, and Margaret as strong, capable leaders, she subverts conventional expectations and highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy in both genders. Through these characters, Strout advocates for a more inclusive and compassionate world, where individuals are free to express their full range of emotions and capabilities, regardless of gender.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper conducts a systematic narrative analysis of Elizabeth Strout's *Tell Me Everything* from the perspective of feminist narratology, revealing how the author employs unique narrative strategies to grant women narrative authority and deconstruct the androcentric literary tradition. Strout's creative practice demonstrates that female writers can employ distinctive narrative strategies—the control of narrative voice, the use of narrative gaps, and breakthroughs in character portrayal—to both present the existential dilemmas women face and endow these dilemmas with due complexity and dignity. More importantly, her work reveals the power of female narrative which is not simply about competing with men for discursive power, but about creating a more inclusive and empathetic narrative possibility, allowing those experiences long excluded by mainstream discourse to finally find shelter within the fissures of the text.

Tell Me Everything is not merely a novel about female experience, but a feminist experiment in narrative form. It tells us that changing the way we narrate is changing the way we understand the world, enabling different voices to be heard is enabling different lives to be seen. This is precisely the contemporary value of feminist narratological research—to arrive at the possibility of liberation at the level of content through the analysis of the politics of form.

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